

## Easter 2023 Dawn Vigil

St Brandon's

Luke 24: 1-12

9 April 2023

A poem by Rachel Mann entitled 'The Angels'<sup>1</sup>:

One look was enough  
to tell they were already  
treating it like home,  
her smile restful, a lover's glance,  
him, hand in the air,  
showing off the place,  
a face so smug it would  
be a pleasure to punch.

I had come to the deep cold  
room of want expecting  
to offer aloes and myrrh,  
my own salts to cure the air.

They offered me a trick of light –  
*Look, see where he is not,*  
*search the linen if you must* –  
but I held the wild kick of hope  
deep inside, like a child  
struggling in my womb.

I gave them by back,  
shielding the gift – my smile –  
and ran.

The poem doesn't fit Luke's account that we have just heard exactly. But there are similarities enough, and in addition things to make us stop and think, and perhaps smile ourselves: two smug angels treating the tomb like home; yet it is also a deep cold room of want; a trick of the light that reveals nothing; a wild kick of hope deep inside like a child in the womb; a smile but then a running away.

What the poem does focus on is the part of the resurrection story *before* we meet the risen Jesus in person. And in that it is focusing on something that is common to all four gospels – they each have a section *before* the risen Christ appears. And, as you probably know, the stories they tell, while there are similarities, are also quite significantly different in several respects.

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<sup>1</sup> Rachel Mann, *The Risen Dust. Poems and stories of passion & resurrection*, Iona: Wild Goose Publications, 2013.

Matthew (28: 1-8) has Mary Magdalene and the other Mary, a great earthquake, one angel rolling away the stone and sitting on it (always an image that makes me smile!), guards who were shaken with fear of him and became like corpses, the angel telling them Jesus is not here but is risen, and to look and then go and tell the disciples, and the women leaving the tomb quickly with fear and great joy, and running!

Mark (16: 1-8) has Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James and Salome, a stone that has already been rolled away, one angel telling them Jesus is risen and is not there, and to go and tell the disciples and Peter, and the women fleeing from the tomb for “quivering and astonishment”, or “terror and amazement” had seized them, and telling no one.

Luke (24: 1-12), as we’ve seen, has Mary Magdalene, Joanna, Mary the mother of James, and the other women who were with them, the stone already rolled away, two angels who tell them Jesus is not here but has been raised, and the women at the end simply returning from the tomb to tell their story.

John (20: 1-13), always different, has Mary Magdalene alone going to the tomb, seeing that the stone had been removed, and running to tell Peter and the other disciple whom Jesus loved who run back to the tomb, then Mary Magdalene returning to the tomb, weeping and looking in seeing two angels one at the head and one at the feet where Jesus’ body had lain, who simply ask her why she is weeping.

So some similarities, but also some quite distinct differences. And we can imagine one of today’s TV detectives trying to get to the bottom of the ‘facts’: “So how many and which of you women were actually there? And was there an earthquake or not? And what happened to the stone? And how many angels were there? And what did they say? And was there a guard, and what happened to them? And did you see a body?”

So while there were one or more women, the stone wasn’t an issue, there was at least one angel, the only ‘facts’ that all four different accounts agree on in detail is that Mary Magdalene was there, and there was no body. So why, when this seems to be such a fundamentally important part of the gospel, do they not seem to be at all bothered to make their accounts match up, to get the ‘facts’ straight?

And I want to suggest that it’s because something much deeper is going on here, something which the ‘facts’ wouldn’t necessarily help with. Because the fundamental understanding that we are mere dust and that this life is all that we have, is suddenly being challenged. And challenged in a deeper way than when Lazarus and the others Jesus raised were given back their earthly lives – but only to die again. All of a sudden, there is a fundamentally different possibility – not yet fully realised – of resurrection, and a resurrection that is a scandal to the one thing life seemingly teaches us – that once you’re dead, that’s it.

In the light of this fundamentally different possibility, it’s quite possible that we approach the resurrection too lightly and too blithely. It’s all about the new life we can see around us, seeds coming through, gambolling lambs, Easter bunnies, chickens and eggs (preferably chocolate), and a story with a satisfying ending, where they all live happily ever after. But the resurrection of Jesus is as deeply serious and as fundamentally transformative as we know His passion and death to be.

What these passages, before we meet the risen Christ, encourage us to do then is to look more deeply at what resurrection might really mean, and how we might respond. And what they also suggest is that there is something terrifying in resurrection. For while it may signal the hope of justice and restitution, and offer the possibility of transformation for those who experience this life as a vale of tears, it also promises the shattering possibility of being called to account in the face of infinite love.<sup>2</sup> And a calling to account not only for each of us, but also for the whole world.

The “fear” of the women in Matthew’s gospel, though coupled with “great joy”; the fleeing from the tomb and the “quivering and astonishment” or “terror and amazement” which seized the women at the original end of Mark’s gospel; Mary’s weeping in John’s gospel might well then be more honest and appropriate responses to resurrection than the apparently unemotional response of the women in Luke’s gospel, or a happy-clappy triumphalism.

Not many of our Easter hymns capture this – they tend to jump over it and land triumphantly on the other side, as it were. But one which does is ‘Were you there when they crucified my Lord?’ the last verse of which runs, ‘Were you there when he rose to glorious life? Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble’. And the last verse of ‘Guide me, O though great Redeemer’ also hints at this, while introducing one further and pretty fundamental idea associated with resurrection: ‘When I tread the verge of Jordan, bid my anxious fears subside; death of death, and hell’s destruction, land me safe on Canaan’s side’.

This passage in Luke’s gospel, and the equivalent passages in the other three gospels, before we meet the risen Christ, encourage us then to take resurrection, what it means and how we might respond, as seriously as we do our Lord’s passion and death. And, while we do so with fear and trembling, also to hold the wild kick of hope deep inside.

Amen

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<sup>2</sup> I have taken parts of this from Rachel Mann, *op.cit.*, pp. 12-13.